

# Committee on Resources

## Subcommittee on National Parks & Public Lands

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### Witness Statement

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TESTIMONY ON H.R. 3693

"Castle Rock Ranch Acquisition Act"

June 13, 2000

For consideration by  
the Subcommittee on National Parks and Public Lands  
Committee on Resources  
United States House of Representatives  
Submitted by Sam Davidson, Senior Policy Analyst  
The Access Fund  
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Dear Chairman Hanson and Members of the Subcommittee,

The Access Fund, America's largest national climbers organization, is pleased to submit this testimony for inclusion into the public record regarding H.R. 3693, the Castle Rock Ranch Acquisition Act, authored by Congressman Mike Simpson.

The Access Fund

The Access Fund is a 501(c)3 non-profit advocacy organization representing the interests of America's technical rock and mountain climbers. There are an estimated 500,000 to one million active climbers in the United States today.

The Access Fund's mission is to keep climbing areas open, and to conserve the climbing environment. To accomplish this mission the Access Fund acquires and manages land; provides funding for conservation and resource impact mitigation projects; develops, produces and distributes climbers education materials and programs; underwrites scientific studies relevant to climbing; and works closely with land managers and other interest groups in the planning and implementation of public lands management and policy.

The Access Fund respectfully recommends this important bill be passed by the Congress and signed into law by the President with all due alacrity that the land-for-land exchange which it authorizes may be accomplished in keeping with the timetable and understandings developed by the various stakeholders.

### Climbers' Stake in this Legislation

As an advocacy group for climbers, the Access Fund's principal interest in Castle Rock Ranch and H. R. 3693 are the numerous granitic rock formations which characterize the hillsides of the ranch property and the national forest and BLM-administered land above it. These rock formations are aesthetically pleasing and have historic value as a landmark along the old California-Oregon Trail. To the climber these rocks are exceptionally attractive, due to their unique morphology and rock quality, summit vistas, and relative ease

of access.

Together with the rock formations found at the adjacent City of Rocks National Reserve, the rocks at Castle Rock Ranch comprise a unique climbing environment. The rock type is not uncommon, but the way it has weathered is highly unusual; this weathering has resulted in rock which is solid, incredibly featured, and varied in degrees of steepness. To the climber it is a marvelous playground, with opportunities for people of all skill levels and interests. Most of the climbing routes are one or two "pitches" (ropelengths) in height, making them less committing outings than are found in many other climbing areas.

Climbers from around the world visit neighboring City of Rocks National Reserve to enjoy its unique and beautiful rock formations. In fact, a significant majority of visitors to this remote area are climbers. When the Castle Rock Ranch land-for-land exchange is completed, climbers will have hundreds of new route opportunities and we envision that the intensity of climber use of City of Rocks will be somewhat eased.

It would be difficult to overstate the importance of Castle Rock Ranch and the land-for-land exchange H.R. 3693 authorizes to climbers. This property will become a nationally-significant climbing area. The climbing community will work with the Idaho State Department of Parks & Recreation to administer and protect the area as a state park. Literally, there are no other places in this country with rock formations like those at City of Rocks and Castle Rock Ranch. The Access Fund is prepared to commit whatever resources are required to see Castle Rock Ranch preserved as part of the public domain.

#### Merits of H.R. 3693

Simply put, this bill is a good one because all stakeholders -- including the American people -- benefit. The legislation supports a process of collaboration between government, non-profit, and private sector interests. The proposed land-for-land exchange is a well-architected deal that is supported by area residents and business interests, as well as conservation groups, the climbing community, the State of Idaho and the National Park Service. H.R. 3693 will benefit the local economy by improving grazing conditions, boosting tourism, and creating jobs. The unique environment will benefit from enhanced resource protection and the removal of threat from development. Climbers, hikers, horse riders, and other recreational enthusiasts will benefit from an expansion of access and opportunity in a nationally-significant area. The federal government and the State of Idaho will benefit from consolidation of ownership of inholdings, which will lead to greater efficiency in administration.

The commitment of the principal stakeholders in the Castle Rock Ranch land-for-land exchange speaks volumes about the importance of the land itself. To date, the interim ownership partners of Castle Rock Ranch -- the Conservation Fund, the Access Fund, and the Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation (IDPR) -- have pooled nearly \$700,000 to acquire this property pending eventual permanent protection as a state park. The Access Fund provided critical "bridge" funding to complete the acquisition of Castle Rock Ranch by the Conservation Fund, while the IDPR has already invested tens of thousands of dollars in road and infrastructure improvements as well as resource assessments.

As public land, Castle Rock Ranch will provide direct public access to significant national forest and BLM lands, popular with hunters, which presently can be accessed only from distant and difficult trailheads. The previous owner of Castle Rock Ranch intended to subdivide and sell lots for residential development. This is not the "highest and best use" of this area. Only a handful of privately-owned resources with this magnitude of natural, recreational, and agricultural values remain in this country. We should not dally in taking steps to guarantee public access to these lands in perpetuity, where the land owners are willing and

other stakeholders are unanimously supportive.

To date, the Access Fund has provided more than \$10,000 in grant funding and other resources to City of Rocks National Reserve, for trail improvements, resource protection, and visitor education. Coupled with our contribution toward the purchase of Castle Rock Ranch, we have invested more than \$50,000 to support climbing and resource protection in this area. We are committed to providing additional funding for long-term support for Castle Rock Ranch. We have developed an excellent relationship with the State of Idaho and look forward to working with IDPR on management of Castle Rock Ranch.

### Summary

H.R. 3693 is a good bill at the right time. This legislation supports the protection and managed use of a unique natural resource, and will benefit local and national interests. Perhaps most importantly, this legislation supports an impressive collaborative process, which should be a model for land use issues: local ranchers and business interests, outdoor recreation groups, conservation organizations, the federal government and the State of Idaho have come together to design a land purchase and exchange which will have broad and lasting benefit.

The Access Fund applauds Congressman Simpson for his vision and timely action to support the Castle Rock Ranch acquisition and land- for-land exchange. With this bill Congressman Simpson has demonstrated his commitment to empowering collaborative, locally-based decision- making on land use issues.

It is vitally important that H.R. 3693 be adopted into law as soon as possible. The current investors in Castle Rock Ranch have non- binding agreements with both the State of Idaho and the National Park Service to complete the purchase of the ranch by the Park Service and the land-for-land exchange with the state quickly enough that their substantial financial stake in the property will not be bound up for years. Moreover, the State of Idaho and the National Park Service are eager to consolidate the private inholdings at Hagerman Fossil Beds National Monument and City of Rocks National Reserve into their respective administrations, to improve efficiency and efficacy of management. Any substantial delay in this authorizing legislation could undermine the entire process.

Chairman Hanson and members of the subcommittee, the Access Fund appreciates the opportunity to provide testimony on this important legislation. We hope you will take it as a sign of just how important H.R. 3693 is to American climbers that we have submitted this testimony, and that you will pass this legislation with some dispatch so that we may move forward with this worthy collaborative project.

Thank you.

s. SAM DAVIDSON

Senior Policy Analyst

The Access Fund

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